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ABSTRACT

The word "grammar" can be defined in at least four different ways: "intuitive grammar," our intuitive sense of sentence structure; "effective grammar," a command of the syntactic resources of the language; "'good' grammar," the use of socially prestigious grammar; and "formal grammar," the systematic study of the structure of the language. Formal grammar is often advocated on the assumption that it will lead to the use of "good" grammar and perhaps improve students' ability to write. However, the results of research do not generally support either of these assumptions. Of the four "types" of grammar, it is intuitive grammar and effective grammar that are most basic to the language arts curriculum. Recognition and appreciation of children's intuitive understanding of sentence structure and their ability to apply this understanding as they read can be gained through the use of miscue analysis and cloze procedures. A variety of sentence-combining activities can be used to help children become even more proficient in comprehending and using the syntactic resources of their language and ultimately become more effective writers. (Author/DS)

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GRAMMAR AND WHAT TO DO WITH IT

As I stared through the machine toward the far end of the darkened room, the ophthalmologist said, "Now just tell me whether this lens is better or worse than the one before."

I wasn't entirely sure, but I said "Better."

"Fine. Now what about this one? Is it better, or worse?"

Actually I couldn't see much difference, and I said so.

"No," he insisted, "Tell me if it's better or worse." He emphasized the words, as if I were hard of hearing.

"Worse," I said, after a pause. I sighed.

"Now this one. Better, or worse?"

I really couldn't tell, but it seemed hopeless to admit that. So I just sat there, frustrated and silent.

"Look," said Dr. M., patronizingly, impatient. "This is supposed to be a simple task. Just tell me whether this lens is better or worse than the last one."

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

Now, what does this chilling anecdote have to do with education? A lot, I think. But the point I want to emphasize here is that we must not let ourselves succumb to such simplistic either-or thinking: to twist the phrase from a Ziebart ad, it's not "us or rust," as the most vocal proponents of the "back to basics" movement would have us believe.

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indeed, a considerable body of research suggests that it is generally useless if not downright pernicious to emphasize what the public often considers basic in the teaching of grammar.

The term grammar has many meanings. At one end of a continuum, "grammar" might be defined simply as the underlying structure of a language; at or near the other end of the continuum, "grammar" might be defined as the formal study of some particular description of the structure of a language. Here, I would like to deal explicitly with the following four meanings of the term "grammar":

Grammar$_1$ In one of its more basic senses, "grammar" may be defined as our intuitive sense of sentence structure (word order, function words, grammatical endings, and the like). The key word here is intuitive: native speakers of a language have a functional understanding of its structure, even though they may not be able to verbalize that knowledge.

Grammar$_2$ In a functional sense, "grammar" might be defined as a command of the syntactic resources of the language, a considerable storehouse of syntactic constructions which can be both comprehended (in listening and reading) and produced (in speaking and writing). In this sense, the term "grammar" is more or less synonymous with "effective grammar."

Grammar$_3$ In perhaps its most common sense, "grammar" is more or less synonymous with "usage." People talk about "good grammar," meaning the use of socially prestigious grammar.

Conversely there is "bad grammar," the use of grammatical forms and constructions which are not prestigious.

Grammar$_4$ In an educational sense, "grammar" often means the formal study of the structure of a language, or even the study of some particular description(s) of the language (e.g. traditional definitions of the parts of speech, structuralist lists of basic sentence types, transformational rewrite rules for defining phrase structure, and so forth).

Thus we are concerned here with four kinds of grammar, what we might call intuitive grammar, effective grammar, "good" grammar, and formal grammar.

Inevitably, perhaps, John O. Public seems mainly concerned with "good" grammar and with formal grammar: with good grammar because it has long been taken as the hallmark of the educated person, and with formal grammar because it has been assumed that the formal study of grammar will lead to the use of good grammar and perhaps will improve students' command of language in broader, less clearly defined ways. Evidence of these concerns is all too abundant, brought to the fore, it would seem, by the recent concern about students' ability (or inability) to write. In my own state of Michigan, for example, the first published version of the state's Minimal Performance Objectives for Communication Skills Education in Michigan (released around 1975) listed fourteen writing objectives for third graders. Twelve of these dealt with grammar, usage, and related aspects of mechanics (complete sentences, standard usage, capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and handwriting).[1]

The importance of good grammar/usage/mechanics is not necessarily at issue here. Even assuming that the mastery of such language conventions is an important goal of public education, there is ample evidence that 1) heavy emphasis upon such language conventions is detrimental to effective language use; and 2) that the formal study of grammar does not necessarily lead to the use of "good" grammar or more effective grammar.

Most adults have unrealistic assumptions about writing and the development of writing ability. Adults often assume, for example, that learning to write is largely a matter of learning to eliminate errors, and that writing instruction in the elementary years should focus upon basic aspects of good grammar/usage/mechanics. Both assumptions are untenable, if our ultimate goal is to produce writer capable of engaging, informing, or persuading an audience.

First, as almost any teacher in the early elementary grades has observed, children do not master any convention of the writing system all at once, once and for all. The child who has learned to leave spaces between words when copying a sentence may run words together when expressing his or her own message on paper; the child who has learned the "correct" formation of lowercase "b" and "d" may confuse the two shapes when trying to write an entire word; the child who has learned to put a period at the end of a simple sentence may misuse the period when incorporating subordinate clauses into his or her written sentences; and so forth. Paradoxically, a giant step forward is often accompanied by a small, temporary step backward.

Thus it is not a simple matter of mastering basic elements of mechanics and <u>then</u> learning to express one's ideas. Rather, the development of form goes hand in hand with the development of content.

Furthermore, a heavy emphasis upon form may actually stunt children's growth in the ability to express and develop ideas. In the early elementary years, especially, children tend to center their attention on one aspect of a task, to the virtual exclusion of everything else. Thus one child may conclude that writing well means indenting each paragraph, another may conclude that writing well means spelling words correctly and leaving spaces between words, and so forth. Almost inevitably, the content of the writing suffers as a result of this focus upon form. Furthermore, an emphasis upon "correctness" will actually discourage growth in the effective use of language. The child quickly learns that it is better to use a short familiar word than to risk misspelling a more sophisticated word, and that it is better to use short, simple sentences than to risk mispunctuating a more complicated sentence. If we want children to become more mature and effective users of language, then we educators must resist the tendency to overemphasize the importance of "good" grammar.

We must also, I think, resist the tendency to overemphasize the value of the formal study of grammar. Perhaps some of us have indeed mastered some conventions of usage in the process of studying grammar, and perhaps, in this process, some of us have become more proficient at understanding and using the syntactic resources of our language. Perhaps. But apparently we are not typical, because reliable research studies indicate that, in general, the formal study of grammar has no appreciable effect upon the overall quality of students' writing (see, for example, Petrosky's review of Harris 1972 and of Elley et al. 1976, in December 1977 English Journal). Furthermore, research suggests

that the formal study of good grammar/usage/mechanics may be less helpful in bringing about improvement in these areas than direct practice and guidance in writing (Harris, as reported by Petrosky; Burrus, as reported by Lundsteen).

It should be noted, too, that most of the studies showing little value in grammar study have been done with secondary level students. For elementary teachers, there is a further caution: the formal study of grammar may require abstract reasoning processes which typically do not emerge until adolescence or beyond. Certainly students may be able to parrot definitions: "a noun is the name of a person, place, thing, or idea," and so forth. And some students may formulate a concept of a noun (or whatever) through the process of induction, much as the typical American child comes, say, to formulate a resonably conventional concept of a dog. But nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs are a lot more abstract than dogs, cats, cows, and horses, so children may have considerable difficulty in formulating conventional concepts of such grammatical terms. And without an intuitive grasp of basic grammatical concepts, the pre-adolescent may well be unable to perform the kind of analysis typically required in formal grammar study. Hence it seems that the formal study of grammar may have little if any place in the elementary classroom.

In summary, then, empirical research does not justify the formal teaching of grammar on pragmatic grounds. Furthermore, a heavy emphasis upon "good" grammar is counterproductive, especially in the early elementary years.

Obviously, however, it is not enough to be negative. If we resist or reject the clamor for increased attention to "good" grammar and formal grammar, then we must be prepared to define what aspects or

kinds of grammar (if any) are appropriate in elementary language arts education. I would argue for the importance of the other two kinds of grammar mentioned but not yet discussed: intuitive grammar, and effective grammar.

Again, the term "intuitive grammar" is merely a shorthand label for our intuitive sense of sentence structure (word order, function words, grammatical endings, and so forth). For the better part of two decades now, it has been commonplace for linguists to assert that children entering school intuitively know the grammar of their native language. Teachers must come to understand and appreciate children's unconscious grammatical knowledge, as well as to understand the nature of the language processes that they are trying to stimulate. Then, with such a background, teachers can use their own understanding of language structure and the language processes in helping children comprehend and use the syntactic constructions of their language. In short, such informed teachers can help children develop more effective grammar.

In such short space, I can only begin to indicate some of the facts about language structure and use that should be common knowledge among teachers, particularly elementary teachers. Given such limitations, I will emphasize just one crucial but seldom understood point: that errors can be a positive sign. This point has already been touched upon, with respect to writing. The child who is moving from mere copying to self-expression will make mistakes in spacing, letter formation, and so forth; the child who is growing in his/her understanding of concepts and use of words will make mistakes in spelling; and the child who is growing in his/her written use of syntax will make mistakes in sentence structure

and/or punctuation. The teacher who appreciates the child's intuitive grasp of structure will learn to recognize and accept such signs of progress, knowing that lasting growth comes only through trial and error.

In reading, too, errors can be a positive sign. Take, for example, the following error or "miscue," as departures from the text are now commonly called. The line division here is the same as in the original text (from Goodman and Burke 1972):

I first saw Claribel when I saw
working in my office.

This miscue could be analyzed on any one of at least three levels of language. On the grapho/phonic level, the level of letters and sounds, we would observe that the first and last letters of the text word have been reversed, and the sequence of sounds in the miscue is totally different. On the word level,we would observe that the word saw has been substituted for the text word was. It is only when we look at the syntactic/semantic level that we see the positive nature of the miscue: it fits with both the grammar and the meaning of the preceding part of the sentence. Rose-Marie Weber's study of first graders showed that about 90% of the time, even the poorer readers' miscues fit with the grammar of what came before. And about 60% of the time, even the poorer reader's miscues fit with the following grammar as well.

Instead of just analyzing and categorizing reading miscues at the word level, teachers need to examine miscues at the level of grammar and meaning. Consider, for example, the following set of miscues from a reader with about two months of reading instruction:

Actual miscue	Word level (indicate type of miscue)	Grammar and meaning level			
		OK with preceding grammar	OK with following grammar	OK with preceding meaning	OK with following meaning
Get a ball, Mary.	substitution	yes	yes	yes	yes
Who rides with Mike? Mary rides with Mike.	insertion and substitution (?)	yes	yes	yes	yes
Mary said,"Play ball, Jeff." Mike and I want to play."	insertion	yes	---	yes	---
Mike said, "I can't ride. I can't play with Jeff and Mary.	reversal	yes	yes	yes	yes
I can play ball."	insertion	yes	yes	yes	yes
Velvet will go on up the tree.	omission	yes	yes	yes	yes

At the word level,each of these miscues would of course be considered an error, pure and simple: a substitution, insertion, reversal, or omission, as the case may be. But at the level of grammar and meaning, the positive nature of these miscues becomes apparent: each miscue results in a grammatically correct sentence, and in some cases the miscue makes the meaning

even more explicit than in the original (see the fuller discussion in Weaver, forthcoming). In short, these miscues reflect the child's intuitive sense of sentence structure and indicate that he tries to make good grammar and good sense out of what he reads.

Teachers who make a habit of looking at children's miscues in context will doubtless not be so quick to conclude that children need to study grammar in order to improve their reading. However, some children do need to be encouraged to use their intuitive sense of language structure as they read, particularly if their reading instruction has placed heavy emphasis on phonics or a sight word approach. One activity teachers find useful is simply that of filling in missing words. Try, for example, to fill in the words missing from my current favorite example, the opening passage of "The Fisherman and his Wife" (The Brothers Grimm, 1945; see Weaver 1977):

> There once was a fisherman who lived with his _____ in a miserable little _____ close to the sea. He went to fish every day, and he fished and fished, and at last one day as he was sitting looking deep down into the shining _____, he felt something on his _____. When he hauled it up, there was a _____ on the end of the line.

Obviously such an activity is most useful if the students discuss their answers and explain how their choice fits, in each case, the grammar and the meaning signaled by the context.

In addition to encouraging children to use their intuitive grasp of sentence structure as they read, teachers need to help children learn to cope with difficult or unfamiliar syntactic constructions. Instead of

emphasizing grammatical terminology, teachers can merely adopt a WHODUNNIT approach, asing WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE types of questions. As an example, let us look at an excerpt from an E. E. Cummings poem, "the hours rise up putting off stars." Before reading the poem, the teacher might prepare students for the central metaphors by encouraging them to imagine what kind of clothes time might wear, how light might walk, how a city might speak and look, and so forth. Then, after reading the poem to the class, the teacher might ask questions like those indicated:

the hours rise up putting off stars and it is

Who or what is getting up? (The hours.)
What kind of clothes are the hours taking off? (Stars.)

Who or what is walking in the street of the sky? (Light.)
What else is light doing? (Scattering poems.)

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What does the city do? (It wakes up.)

Who has a song upon her mouth and death in her eyes? (The city.)

mouth having death in her eyes

Such analysis can be the starting point for more divergent types of questions, like "Why would a city have death in its/her eyes?" And of course both types of questions should lead to a fuller appreciation of the poem and, in general, to a fuller understanding of the syntax of our language.

Sentence-combining activities are another means of increasing students' receptive and productive command of grammar (see Hughes 1975 and O'Hare 1973). In addition to the various kinds of preformulated exercises found in such useful books as Strong's Sentence Combining and O'Hare's Sentencecraft,

on-the-spot exercises can be formulated in conjuction with a particular reading and/or writing activity. In preparation for Cummings' "the hours rise up," for example, a teacher might have students combine "Light walks into the street of the sky" with "Light is scattering poems," to produce such results as the following:

Light walks into the street of the sky, scattering poems.

Scattering poems, light walks into the street of the sky.

Having built up such sentences from basic underlying sentences, students will be better able to comprehend Cummings' actual line, "into the street of the sky light walks scattering poems."

But of course such preparatory sentence-combining activities need not be so tightly structured. The teacher could begin, for example, by asking students to imagine how light might move through the sky; it might glide, for instance, or streak, or stalk. Choosing one of these, the teacher could write a basic sentence on the board:

Light streaks through the sky.

Then the teacher might ask the class to focus on one aspect of personified light, such as its eyes. How do its eyes look? What can its eyes be compared to? Perhaps the class will suggest that its eyes are fill with suns, or streaming with stars. Now we have two sentences:

Light streaks through the sky.

Its eyes are streaming with stars.

These sentences can be combined to give, among other possibilities,

the sentence

Light streaks through the sky, its eyes streaming with stars.

Next, in response to the question "How does light move?", the class might suggest such possibilities as "slowly," "quickly," "swift as a comet." Adding the latter idea to our growing sentence, we might have

Swift as a comet, light streaks through the sky, its eyes streaming with stars.

Additional sentence-combining activities could precede not only a reading and discussion of Cummings' poem, but also the writing of original poems. For example, five minutes' concentration on the way home from the doctor's office produced the following haiku:

Swift as a comet,
Eyes streaming with crystal stars,
Streaks the fire god, Light.

It's not exactly great literature, I'll admit; in fact, it's not literature at all. But it is better than I could have done without the preceding sentence-combining activity. I might add, too, that such sentence-combining can also be valuable in the rewriting stage, to help writers flesh out skeletal ideas with descriptive and narrative detail.

In passing, we might also note that one can "teach" verbs by eliciting a set of action words like "glides," "streaks," and "stalks." Similarly, one can "teach" absolutes by helping students create phrases like "its eyes streaming with stars." In fact, one might even offer the term "verb" or "absolute" as the students are in the process of developing

the concept. But such incidental teaching of grammar is a far cry from the systematic study of formal grammar advocated by the most vocal of the "back to basics" advocates.

Instead of a heavy emphasis on "good" grammar and formal grammar, then, what we educators can offer is an understanding and appreciation of children's intuitive sense of grammar, coupled with an ability to help children become more effective in comprehending and producing language. It is intuitive grammar and effective grammar that are most basic to the language arts curriculum.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]These communication objectives are currently being revised. Thanks to the efforts of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, the new set of writing objectives will be considerably broader. Similar improvements can be expected in other areas, due to the increased involvement of the Michigan Reading Association and the Michigan Speech Association.